

# The Techgether Program

## 1. Project Purpose

***The Problem:*** Birmingham, Alabama has a strong, diverse, service oriented economy and is recognized as a Southern leader in the areas of engineering, telecommunications, and finance including 257 affiliates of Fortune 500 companies and still Birmingham is a city of inconsistency and extreme disproportions. In a city known for such technology and success, there are still many individual who have no basic computer knowledge. These people are at an enormous disadvantage to the rest of the world. Lack of technological knowledge will impede them from improving their lives. In Birmingham, 37,806 households are very low-income 18,793 are low-income households<sup>2</sup>. 20.9% of the City's residents live below the poverty line. <sup>1</sup> The highest percent of very-low income and low-income households were black. One of the most sobering statistics is that over one-half of the people living in poverty are employed. The number of black families living in poverty increased from 46.5 percents to 48 percent and Hispanic families living below poverty who were employed increased from 50.7 percent to 65.1 percent. Of the families living in poverty, a female, an increased of 7.8 percent, headed two-thirds. When looked at racially, white female –headed households decreased from 42.9 to 31.1 percent. Hispanic female households decreased from 50.0 percent to 42.9 percent but the rate for black female-headed households increased from 62.6 percent to 72.2 percent. The unemployment rate among black residents is two and half times greater than that of the white rate and the unemployment rate among black women is still rising. So many of our citizens are suffering from poverty and the low-income cycle and that working status alone cannot heal this epidemic. These residents need job training and skill building. Our goal is to bring these individuals Internet service and with that, all the possibilities in the world. One of the biggest challenges to overcoming the conditions of distress in the target neighborhoods is to demonstrate to residents the need for them to become computer literate as a means of hurdling their current barriers to success. Access to information technology can be a “way out” for economically disadvantaged families, yet too few either have the opportunity, or have the training, to fully utilize the resources that may be available. Our communities have identified the lack of neighborhood based training opportunities currently prevents all citizens from having equal access to this technology. Typically, these residents do not have convenient transportation options, so access to technology usually requires placing computer technology centers within close walking distance of most residents.

Of primary concern to Techgether Program is the predicament of young people in this area. Many of these young people have already “checked out” of school, either physically or mentally, leaving their chances for a successful career in jeopardy. Birmingham-Area Employers reports that only one-half of applicants for its high-tech training programs has the minimum basic

reading and math skills to qualify<sup>3</sup> (8<sup>th</sup> grade skills level), even though they hold high school diplomas or G.E.D.s. Developing programs that use technology to engage, educate, give them hope for a better; life must be a priority for this project. Few computers are available and those do exist do not deliver the Internet and its riches. It is estimated that less than 10% of all students have Internet access from home: poor families cannot afford connectivity, creating a critical needs for electronic resources in the community. Another problem many of these families will soon be facing welfare reform. Very low-income individuals and families with children face the potential of homelessness, increased crime, drug abuse, domestic violence, and stress relating to fewer subsidies. We need to educate residents on employment and social opportunities in order

to increase self-sufficiency. There is a need for resident job training programs and employment referral services.<sup>4</sup>

Low income individuals who are otherwise capable of mastering a college education or job attainment and making substantial contributions to their communities are often stymied by barriers such as cultural differences, a lack of information literacy, an imperfect understanding of the college application process, language difficulties and the lack of confidence that these obstacles often engender. Many drop out of high school or fail to enter a complete college. Their failures hurt both themselves and their communities: even students who perform relatively well leave high school without any real electronic literacy; they are ill- prepared for college where such knowledge is often presumed. By providing the training residents need to qualify for these jobs, the Techgether Program partners will demonstrate the educational effectiveness of technology and succeed in moving many more families from welfare to work.

- **The Solution:** The Center for Urban Missions has a long history of community service. We want to expand our service even further into the community by implementing The Techgether Program throughout the low-income and empowerment zones throughout Birmingham and Jefferson County. The objectives of this project are:
  - Increased access to technology for low- income residents.
  - Increase by at least 25% the number of clients who receive training.
  - Ensure all partners have adequate technical assistance and support for their technology investment.
  - Provide the technological infrastructure to facilitate continuous career development for disadvantaged youth, families, and displaced workers.

The Techgether Program will help bridge significant information gaps for residents in underserved Jefferson County communities.

We use the term Techgether in an intellectual sense: these Internet-connected facilities will tie our communities to technology, offering information and academic resources. At these sites we propose to use electronic resources and tools in a program designed to energize and stimulate participants about both secondary higher education and job skill development. Each site will be outfitted with multimedia, fully network Internet –accessible PC's.

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<sup>3</sup>Chamber of Commerce/Jefferson County October 2000

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of HUD/PHA Plans/Annual Plan for Fiscal Year 2004

**Establish nine community technology centers that are easily accessible to residents.**

Nine centers will be established or upgraded to provide easy access to residents in all parts of the community. Only two of these centers will be new facilities, to be located at Jefferson County Center for Family Wellness, STARS, Inc. Six other existing centers will be upgraded, including Holy Trinity World Outreach, Guiding Light Christian Church, County Housing Education and Assistance, Inc. and NUSE, Inc., extension offices, Calvary Resurrection and The Center for Urban Missions. Lawson State has 20 computers that do not need any improvement. These sites were selected to provide broad-based, convenient access to technology for all residents and to ensure that all centers were equipped with consistent and common quality. A total of 60 workstations will be created as a result of this strategy. Each computer will be configured to handle a minimum Internet connection at 56k bps, printer access, and networking capability. The total cost estimate to establish and upgrade these centers is \$100,000 to be expanded in the first six months of the project.

All computer upgrades and installations will be managed by the staff at DigiVidz, which specializes in developed low-cost computer workstation for nonprofit organizations. DigiVidz has already conducted a comprehensive assessment of existing technology at all the partnering Techgether agencies. In addition, they have performed a careful analysis of the cost of upgrading existing computers will be upgraded, as long as they meet the minimum system requirements established for this project. In addition to training program, the nine-community technology centers will provide a minimum of 100 hours of public access for residents each month. Public access will be scheduled at various times at different centers, with regularly scheduled training classes taking precedence in most cases.

**Education and Curriculum:** The Center for Urban Missions has partnered with a number of organizations to provide vocational and technical training to our program participants. Lawson State will provide GED training and testing. Ramp, Industries will provide remanufacturing commercial grade beverage equipment training and certification. STARS, Inc will provide training in youth counseling and education, Jefferson County Center for Family Wellness will provide training in the food and cultivation arena. (Serving Others As Resources) S.O.A.R. will provide training in cosmetology. New Horizons will provide training for students interested in technology certification. Mult-Culturally United for Service through Expression, Inc will provide training in Arts, Music. Classes for County Housing Education and Assistance, Inc have already been created for youth in the academics. Birmingham Southern College, Central Alabama Youth Foundation and the University of Alabama in Birmingham have agreed to provide college prep classes and other services as needed.

? *Measurable outcomes:* The Techgether Program will deliver nine specific measurable outcomes, outlined in App. For details on the evaluation process, closely related to measurable outcome, see section 5, below.

? *Innovation and potential as a model for the other communities:* The Techgether Program offers an innovation model for other communities to follow. Its innovation lies in its organizational model, ease of replicability, and versatility of purpose.

**Organizational model:** The model included an inventive joint venture between large and small publicly funded colleges, two community development centers, four faith based organizations, four private businesses, and a host of volunteers and supporters. Together, the partners have developed creative strategies for overcoming traditional barriers to access.

**Ease of replicability:** The Techgether Program developed under the grant will be a complete package: community developed organization and other organizations wishing to establish a site will purchase a “franchise” at a modest price (to be determined over the course of the project) that covers The Center for Urban Mission’s costs. In return, they will receive a connection to The Center’s technical infrastructure, an electronic information literacy curriculum, access to the electronically delivered courses, and the ability to use the name “Techgether” in their own setting: these valuable products will provide organizations the incentive to reallocate scarce resources in support of this Internet- centered academic /vocational program.

**Versatility:** The Techgether Program can be emulated or adapted to local conditions by other organizations and communities facing challenges like Birmingham’s. While the model is one of academic assistance and job development and placement for low-income individuals, it has the potential to generate many different and equally worthwhile outcomes, in a variety of settings. The Techgether Program can also support other activities. The Techgether Program can also be expanded to deliver other electronic curricula: education in basic skills, communication skills, ESL, citizenship, and cross-cultural instruction could be adapted for delivery via the Web, using the model developed for the Core Curriculum.

## 2. Project Feasibility

Our proposal is one that can be accomplished within the 24 months we propose, because we will build upon existing partnerships and projects, including courses whose content already exists. Because our proposal links to existing enterprises, it offers a greater chance of achieving real outcomes within the grant period.

**Technical approach:** the equipment and technologies we are proposing are both stable and known. The Techgether Program will be self-contained work stations networked facilities using Microsoft Windows based software and a dedicated Pentium file server. The network topology will be 10/100 base T Ethernet; a local tape back-up system for each server and a shared high-speed laser printer will be installed as well. Students will have access to the Internet and a variety of other electronic resources. The Center for Urban Missions will provide participants with e-mail accounts, enabling them to interact both with peers counselors and teachers, expanding their horizons and the people with whom they can communicate. A detailed description of the technical approach appears under “Equipment” in the Budget Narrative.

**Interoperability and scalability:** The Internet itself is based on open standards, and The Center for Urban Missions is directly connected to the Internet. No restrictive or private protocols exist:

The whole notion of our project is to take advantage of a network that is fully interoperable with other systems. The Center has the capacity to add many sites to its telecommunications network.

**Technical alternatives:** The technical approach chosen for this project is superior because it not only includes a Wireless Internet provider ( Traveller, Inc.), versus a LAN line provider (Bellsouth or ITC Delta Com, for example), but also this eliminates the T1 loop charges. An existing and stable infrastructure like Traveller Internet Solutions ensures reliability of access, as well as cost-effectiveness.

**Maintenance and/or upgrading:** Each partner is committed to maintaining and upgrading their Techgether site. Each has committed staff time to the maintenance effort. In addition, The Center for Urban Mission will operate a Help Desk to which all locations will have access. As one of the largest recipients in the State of local funding, The Center for Urban Missions will maintain its network at the highest standard, taking advantage of all new opportunities made possible by advances in technology.

**Applicant qualifications:** Capsulated resumes for each member of the project team are appended to the Project Narrative. Project Director Johnathan Austin understands both programmatic and technical issues and is well placed in the organization to ensure the project's success.

### ? **Budget and implementation schedule**

**Budget:** We seek support for equipment and furniture for the nine Techgether facilities: training for teachers and counselors; expanded licensing agreement for electronic information resources; and preparation or 'translation' for three more Core Curriculum courses for Internet delivery, as well as the Core vocational training and job skill development course. Considerable detail appears in the Budget narrative.

**Schedule:** A detailed "The Techgether Program Schedule" for this 24-month project appears in appendices. This one-year operational period will permit us to pilot both curricula, to evaluate our successes and failures, to modify the program as needed, and to plan post-TIIAP franchises to other sites.

**Sustainability:** Each of our partners has made a commitment to use its own funds to keep its site going, after the grant period; likewise, The Center for Urban Missions will continue the Internet connection. The Center for Urban Mission is committed to maintaining its Core Curriculum. In the future, we will use franchise revenues to support these efforts.

With the Core course complete, the cost of replicating The Techgether Program becomes far less than that for establishing these initial centers and their associated programming: the effort required on the part of The Center for Urban Missions and its franchisees to implement new sites will be far less in subsequent environments, as will the costs.

## **3. Community Involvement**

- **Partnerships:** This project will focus on The Center for Urban Missions, Holy Trinity World Outreach, N.H. Price Elementary, Guiding Light Christian Church, Calvary Resurrection, Jefferson County Center for Family Wellness, County Housing, Education, and Assistance, Inc., Muse Inc., Lawson State Community College, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Letters from these and other partners specifying their commitments and contributions to the project are attached.

The Center for Urban Missions is an excellent applicant because of our technological power and infrastructure. The organization has a particular focus on the transition of unemployed to employed, and expertise in evaluating programs with this focus. Our non-profit community organization partners were selected because The Center for Urban Missions already has ongoing collaborative programs with each of them. This predicts success for the project and allows us to start from a place of strength. Each site's proximity

to low-income housing will enable close communication among students, teachers, and faculty. Each center already has some experience with computers (although not Internet-connected equipment); each has the capability to service and maintain the equipment it will receive as a result of the Techgether Program proposal, another cost-effective aspect of our project.

Among its contributions, The Center for Urban Missions lists certain personnel costs, tuition for students taking web-enhanced Core courses, and cabling for the sites. The seven partners will each contribute space for the sites, staff time needed to operate them and deliver the program, maintenance costs, and the supplies and software beyond that specified in the detailed budget. The Center for Urban Missions will permit five sites to attach themselves to its network. The University of Alabama at Birmingham will contribute two days of professional time to review and comment on Carter & Associates' project evaluation.

- ***Involvement of the Community:*** We have sought community involvement in the design of our proposal in several important ways. We began by reviewing data about the community drawn from census records, the consolidated plan, the Birmingham One Year Action Plan, Birmingham Housing Authority PHA 5-year plan, and similar sources; the appendices show our findings. On several occasions and on-going, The Center for Urban Missions team met with teachers and administrators from the sites we proposed to involve in the project. Brainstorming and discussions of participants needs and how best to meet those needs characterized these meetings.

To ensure continuing community involvement during the course of the project, we will appoint a Steering Committee whose members (teachers, counselors, students, parents, The Center for Urban Missions, resident of public housing, other representatives, and local government) will ensure the model develops in ways that best meet our partners' and communities needs.

- ***Support for end-users:*** A major strength of this project is the consistent and high-level support for participants it provides. The Techgether Program sites are small, accommodating 10-30 students at a time. They are consistently staffed by teachers or counselors, and are trained by The Center for Urban Missions faculty and staff to assist students with the use of the technology and deliver a specific curriculum: students are not simply left to their own devices to explore the Web in an unstructured, aimless fashion. The Center's Help Desk will be available to solve any problems related to the network connection.
- ***Privacy:*** The University, The Center for Urban Missions, the churches, and employees are already well aware of issues of confidentiality relating to student records, an important aspect of the evaluation feature of the project, and will ensure that there is no unauthorized access to such data. A written project policy will further protect students' privacy. The software installed on the Techgether Program workstations will anonymously meter usage. Private user-selected passwords will be used for email.

#### **4. Reducing Disparities**

- ***Description and documentation of the disparities:*** Our target area's income is at least 55% below that of the rest of Birmingham and commonly up to 80% less. In inner city

neighborhoods (such as the ones we plan to target) one finds crippling needs: 78% of the children live in single parent homes, where the rate of poverty is six times that found where two parents are present<sup>5</sup>. Many students drop out of high school or fail to enter or complete college, the majority of the parents do not have any job skills, and many do not have a high school diploma or a GED. The percentage of high school graduates in this area is 26% below the Alabama state average<sup>6</sup>. Staying in high school and graduating reduces all the factors associated with dropouts, such as a lifetime of minimum wage work, unemployment, welfare, or even crime. The lack of an understanding of an electronic information infrastructure shuts the door to many jobs that require computer knowledge. As the new millennium approaches, technology is available for voting, banking, even grocery shopping. Virtually every service and product imaginable can be accessed via computer. The Techgether Program will ensure Birmingham's citizens in poverty can take advantage of such opportunities.

- ***Strategies for overcoming barriers to access:*** The Center for Urban Missions wants to share electronic and academic wealth with residents at these six inner-city locations, breaking down economic and geographic barriers to computer access and internet skills. And with them, barriers to consider college as an option, applying to college, attending college, job training and placement, and developing critical thinking skills. To imagine the extent to which our proposal will reduce disparities in access to the internet, one need only contrast the access that most Birmingham residents have to the internet, with that of the residents in our community who will be served by the new Techgether Programs. Most Birmingham residents have access to sophisticated computers, fully networked, and providing internet connectivity.

By contrast, the residents in Birmingham public housing and low-income homes have almost no access to Internet-capable computers. There are no existing electronic information literacy training programs and in some settings no systematic use is made of electronic tools for the college application process. No Internet-enhanced education is in place. This project will remove these disparities, bringing residents in public housing parity of access with other residents to the Internet.

- ***The need for Federal support:*** Without Federal support, none of the partners in this project can achieve its stated goals. The TIAP program is best suited to support the Techgether Program because it funds a variety of needs—equipment, staff time, training, connectivity—rather than narrowly focusing on only one aspect of the project. Furthermore, TIAP allows us to direct the project to a broader spectrum (the entire academic and job training curriculum rather than only academic) than do many federal or state agencies. We are not tied to any particular brand of equipment, as some corporate sponsors demand. Finally, TIAP concentrates on underserved populations—exactly the kind of population that surrounds and populates Birmingham public and low-income housing.

## 5. Evaluation and Dissemination

- ***Evaluation design:*** In the appendices appear a detailed evaluation plan, including assessment indicators, measurement tools, and time intervals that will provide for feedback on key issues at periodic points in the development of the project. Taken as a whole, these assessments will enable us to capture the true outcomes of the project. Analysis of the indicators we propose will permit an increased level of understanding of how participants

<sup>5</sup>Birmingham. Madison County Consolidated Plan

<sup>6</sup>Alabama Department of Education

access information electronically, use it, and apply it to the future goals in their lives. We will seek to determine whether the Techgether Program improves electronic information literacy, high school graduation, college application, job preparation and placement from our partner sites. A post-project longitudinal study will measure the success of those students who go on to attend college 24 months beyond their completion of the Techgether Program.

- ***Qualifications of the evaluation team:*** The Techgether Program will be evaluated by their stakeholders. Our approach calls for a Steering Committee whose make-up is described above. Carter & Associates will develop the actual evaluation tools and provide guidance to the programs designers and users. Carter & Associates is an independent research and evaluation consulting firm formed in 1985 to provide research and design support to public, philanthropic, and private-sector organizations. Carter & Associates has done work for the South Central Conference, General Conference of SDA, North American Division of Disaster Relief, the Pulaski Housing Authority, Birmingham Housing Authority, and many other organizations. The University of Alabama at Birmingham's experience in the internal evaluation of similar projects gives special value to the review and commentary it will provide on Carter & Associates' assessment.
- ***Plans for dissemination of project activities:*** We will use the spring of 2006 to demonstrate the program to other schools, social, and civic groups in Alabama, pique their interest, and prepare to replicate it in their settings. We will develop and distribute an information kit about the franchises, advertising their availability via a number of appropriate web sites, and in various professional journals read by teachers, non-profit groups, and academic leaders. Press releases will be sent by The Center for Urban Missions to city and state media, highlighting the projects' accomplishments, future plans, and success stories. In the fourth semester of the project, partners will hold several community workshops for teachers and counselors, academicians, students, parents, and community leaders to demonstrate the project and generate an interest in new franchises. Our site partners will disseminate information through professional contacts.